

Right to Information in M.P. soon

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The right to information, which is on the agenda of the United Front Government at the Centre and is part of the Common Minimum Programme, would be facilitated in Madhya Pradesh through legislation.

The State Government, it is learnt, has already prepared a draft Bill which is likely to be moved in the next Assembly session.

Meanwhile, an experiment to honour people's right to information is being launched in Bilaspur division on October 2 coinciding with Gandhi Jayanti. The State Government has chosen the Public Distribution System and decided to make its working more transparent by allowing all to have full access to records at the fair price shops. The Bilaspur Divisional Commissioner's office has issued a notification on September 9 which defines the mechanism for obtaining information regarding the functioning of the fair price shops.

As part of this initiative, special perforated registers of stock, distribution and ration cards have been prepared to facilitate maintenance of records in two copies, one of which will be forwarded to the tehsildar or naib-tehsildar incharge of the sub-tehsil. The salesman of the fair price shop will forward original copies of the stock and distribution registers at brief and regular intervals to the cooperative society or manager of the cooperative consumer store, the manager would then forward them to the food inspector of the area within five days and he would in turn dispatch the record to the tehsildar or naib-tehsildar within five days.

A consumer may ask for a copy of these records for a period not going back beyond three months. To obtain a certified photo copy, he will have to pay Rs five rupees per page to the tehsildar or naib-tehsildar. For issuing the copy, duly certified by the tehsildar or naib-tehsildar, a photocopier will be installed in each tehsil / sub-tehsil and its owner, a private individual, will be recognized as a section writer.

When contacted, a senior bureaucrat appreciated the avowed objective of providing transparency in Government dealings through the right to information. However, he expressed a word of caution and said in its eagerness to place members of the public on the same pedestal as members of Parliament and State legislatures. In some cases, by enacting a law, the State should not ignore the massive exercise that all departments have to undertake for collecting information required by a few hundred MLAs and MPs.

Another officer expressed apprehension that if information is to be provided with the same speed and transparency, all other work of the Government or the concerned departments might grind to a halt. Therefore the system should first mature to a level where it can digest a legislation, understand its spirit and follow its content and only ask for what is necessary be emphasized. Looking at the issue from another extreme, he said it remains to be seen how transparency would be brought about to the case of a system, which continues to work under the Official Secrets Act and the various gradations of secrecy and confidentiality continue to remain in statute books.

As for the limited experiment being launched to ensure transparency in the working of the public distribution system in Bilaspur division, he said, a lot of responsibilities are being cast, along with penalties, for non-performance on certain individuals holding certain records. This is by itself laudable but also practical, be observed and went on ask where is the extra infrastructure to undertake the responsibility of the extra burden.

The Bilaspur unit of Bharat Gyan Vigyan Samiti is hosting a national convention of its various units at Bilaspur between September 30 and October 2 to thrash out the issue of right to information and devise ways and means to integrate it with ongoing literacy and post-literacy activities in the state.